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Measuring Difference?

The United Nations' shift from Progress to Poverty

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Abstract

This paper examines how the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) redefined their idea of development over the two decades from 1990, no longer presenting it as only a matter of economic progress but instead focusing more on the problem of poverty and its reduction. This change of definition was closely associated with changes in the preferred measurement of development, from average income (based on national income accounting) to the proportion of the population holding certain characteristics of what it meant to live in poverty (instantiated in various index number formulations). Measurements of development thus became direct measures of socio-economic difference, not just between nations, but also within nations. This change was designed to create numbers that would be effective in capturing and communicating those differences in ways usable for both policy and public purposes. Those numbers thus provided a resource for fighting for poverty reduction – though the UNDP had few powers to hold governments to account.

1. Introduction

The late 20th century saw positive rates of growth in some regions alongside worsening economic conditions in other parts of the world. The international community were forced to confront the reality that economic growth might not always be good for the poor, and international institutions started to shift their focus from development as growth towards poverty, first in terms of inequality and then towards a broader sense of what it meant to be poor. This shift happened to varying degrees, in different ways, over the last three decades. We capture this historical shift in the notion of development by studying the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) at three different moments. The domain is quite complex: there was no simple linear history in the changing ideas, nor in the new measuring instruments that were constructed alongside this reconceptualization, of what development meant. It is evident too that this was a general re-thinking of the agenda in the main international organizations, not just the UNDP, but also the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). There were multiple projects on poverty reduction, by multiple agencies (including non-governmental organizations) following their own paths, sometimes in parallel, sometimes intersecting and sometimes joining up.

We investigate and analyze (in Section 2) how the UNDP shifted their *narrative* of development, first understanding it in terms of progress and human development and then concentrating on those people denied development or in poverty. This redefinition turned their attention away from measuring development by growth per capita first towards the Human Development Index and thence to focus on poverty in the Human Poverty Index and thence to focus on the experiences of poverty in the Multidimensional Poverty Index (in Section 3).

In choosing these particular new measurement structures, the UNDP opened up the use of the measured numbers to a range of uses and users. As we concluded in a recent paper on measuring development, the UNDP has been, and continues to be, involved in a massive program of development 'accounting', involving an associated system of audit and accountability (Morgan and Bach, 2018). Here we analyze how the shift in the categories measured offered possibilities for intervention that were much more plausible than those of earlier development initiatives. Changing the focus of what development meant onto poverty reduction, and then to relieving the experiences of poverty, offered possibilities of intervention that were much more narrowly focused, and easier to design, than before. While reducing poverty might be easier in principle than increasing growth, accountability remained the issue in the context of a system designed, overseen, and largely dictated by international agencies rather than domestic governments. On the one hand, those who chose the categories for measurement embedded their own norms and ideas into these definitional choices. On the other hand, the categories had to be measurable and operable for a wide range of countries and therefore practicable. The new accounting regime had a two-fold power base: *informationally*, it was built into choices of measuring instruments because new notions of development required different kinds of poverty index numbers, but for *intervention* purposes – even though it invited local actions –

it was still largely operated by those who had made those choices (for example to privilege poverty reduction over growth and fiscal rectitude). Section 4 considers the broader process of audit and accountability involved in these changes.

2. From Narratives of Progress to Narratives of Poverty

During the 1960s and 1970s, the international development agenda was progressive and interventionist, but this changed during the 1980s when marketization, neo-liberalism and austerity became more common. When the dust had settled, the consequences were reflected in decreasing per capita income, and increasing poverty and inequality in the IMF loan-recipient countries. Decreasing expenditure on social policies had led to reduced education enrolment and slowed the reduction of infant mortality rates in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (Cornia, 2016; Cornia et al., 1987; Woodward, 1992). By the end of the 1980s, the market economic model was being widely criticized (Stewart, 2017, p.15).

That experience of the 1980s – often referred to as the 'lost decade' – spawned a new focus on development re-framed in terms of human-oriented development and poverty, conceptualized through Amartya Sen's capabilities approach,[1] and launched with the UNDP's first *Human Development Report* in 1990. Our primary example of the UNDP was not an anomaly, but rather an instance of a growing trend within development discourse. As documented by secondary sources and the World Bank itself, weak and variable growth performance in East Asia, Latin America's loss of development in the 1980s, and Sub-Saharan Africa's increasing number of people living in poverty, meant that the international institutions, had to deal more directly with poverty and income distribution (Shahid, 2008; OBrien et al., 2009). The increasing poverty and inequality of the time pushed these international institutions to understand the poor as active economic agents, yet often powerless to better their socio-economic situation.

It takes only a quick glimpse at the successive World Bank's annual *World Development Reports* (first published in 1978) to see that the Bank's objective became more explicitly concerned

[1] This intellectual connection is widely known, but Sen was already linked to the UN's work: he served as an advisor and consultant to the Secretary-General and many parts of the UN system, including the International Labor Organization, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Children Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, World Food Program, United Nations Development Fund for Women, World Institute for Development Economics Research, and then, extensively, the UNDP.

with reducing poverty as of 1990 (World Bank, 1990). This was evident at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (note its title), a conference called by the World Bank to celebrate its 50-year anniversary. The summit gathered many protestors chanting '50 years is enough' – a reaction to worsening standards of living and increasing poverty and inequality in some regions, thought to be induced by the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment policies (Shahid, 2008). Researchers and civil society were ever more convinced that those policies did not reduce poverty, as the IMF and World Bank had promised they would (e.g. (Roy, 1997; Felice, 1997, pp.110–113). The 1995 World Summit brought together the largest group of world leaders at the time, and was the "first time at such a high level the international community committed itself to doing something about poverty" (Felice, 1997, p.108). The leaders present declared: "we commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world" (Felice, 1997, p.108). The post-hegemonic approach that followed acknowledged differences in development principles and prescribed more modest goals (OBrien et al., 2009, p.5). And, as argued by O'Brian et al., the multilateral economic institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF, had begun to engage more with social groups since the 1980s, and by the 1990s were creating a new structure where bottom-up processes were given more room to voice concerns and suggest alternative actions (OBrien et al., 2009, pp.1–3).

The then World Bank president, James D. Wolfensohn, responded to the protestors at the 1995 Summit, and the growing criticisms of the Bank's operations, by encouraging the Bank's economists to seek inputs from other social sciences, inducing the Bank to take a more expansive view on development. Consequently, the Bank's mission statement became "A world free of poverty" – notably carved into the wall at the Washington headquarters[2] and the title of a book commissioned by the Bank published in 2000 (Granzow, 2000). Continuing the trend, the 2000 *World Development Report* was entitled *Attacking Poverty*, arguing that "faced with this picture of global poverty and inequality, the international community has set itself several goals for the opening years of the century, based on the discussions at various United Nations Conferences in the 1990s," prioritizing especially the reduction of poverty (World Bank, 2000, p.6).

[2] https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview#1

A second initiative, the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, launched in 1996 by the World Bank and IMF, was supposed to attend to the problematic "links between debt relief, poverty reduction, and social policies" (IMF, 2011). As of 1996, loan recipients were required to write a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper that constructed a national plan to reduce poverty in accordance with the Millennium Development Goal's major target to halve global poverty.[3] There was a clear continuation from the UNDP's work on poverty to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (Aziz, 2001, p.80).[4]

We evidence this shift from economic growth targets to poverty reduction targets since the 'lost decade' of the 1980s, by analyzing three moments of change at the UNDP signaled in the UNDP *Human Development Reports* of 1990, 1997 and 2010; we rely also on the literature of the period and later, and on the UN Intellectual History Project, especially the project's oral histories.[5] Beginning with the UNDP *Reports*, and in broad strokes, the 1990 *Report* argued for focusing on all people because they "are the real wealth of the nation" (UNDP, 1990, p.9), the 1997 *Report* shifted the aim of human development to "eradicate poverty" (UNDP, 1997, p.2). UNDP's next step was marked in the 2010 *Report,* which focused on the dimensions of poverty, on uneven distribution, and on periods of progress and regress (UNDP, 2010, p.1).

The initial moment of change, marked by UNDP's first *Human Development Report* of 1990*,* reported the institution's change of focus from fostering income growth to fostering human development (UNDP, 1990, p.9). As the 2010 *Report* later narrated that history, "the 1990 *Human Development Report* was launched following a period of deep economic and debt crises, when policy thinking was dominated by notions of stabilization and adjustment" (UNDP, 2010, p.15). The 1990 report wanted to exchange those notions to focus on human development as "a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to

[3] The Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative then replaced the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative in 2005.
[4] Sartaj Aziz, one of the interviewees in the UN Intellectual History Project's Oral Histories (see footnote below), was first director of commodities and trade at the Food and Agriculture Organization in 1971 and then assistant president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development in 1977.
[5] The UN Intellectual History Project, established in 1999, was set up as an independent initiative by the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies of the City University of New York and consisted of a set of edited books written by people close to the UN, and 76 oral history interviews of UN officials that have been transcribed. The edited books include Jolly et (2004), Jolly et al (2009) and Ward (2004), which offered useful background and details for this paper.

enjoy a decent standard of living" (UNDP, 1990, p.10). The idea was to implement an enabling strategy that would help people to experience higher levels of well-being. And enlarging people's choices could be done not only through increasing aggregate levels of income, but through better health and more education (UNDP, 1990, p.10). In sum, the 1990 focus was on all people's choices and their associated level of well-being.

At the second moment of change, epitomized in the UNDP's 1997 *Human Development Report*, the focus shifted from human development for all, to concentrate on how poor people were denied development. The UNDP's new purpose was founded on: "Human development to eradicate poverty" – the title of the overview chapter in the 1997 report (UNDP, 1997, p.2) which contained the following statement:

> The contrast between human development and human poverty reflects two different ways of evaluating development. One way, the "conglomerative perspective," focuses on the advances made by all groups in each community, from the rich to the poor. This contrasts with an alternative viewpoint, the "deprivational perspective," in which development is judged by the way the poor and the deprived fare in each community. Lack of progress in reducing the disadvantages of the deprived cannot be washed away by large advances – no matter how large – by the better-off people (UNDP, 1997, p.15).

Our third moment is signaled in the 2010 *Human Development Report,* which created a broader focus on the poverty of the have-nots, narrated by Sen in the introduction:

> The world has moved on since 1990. There have been many gains (in literacy for example), but the human development approach is motivationally committed to concentrating on what remains undone – what demands most attention in the contemporary world – from poverty and deprivation to inequality and insecurity (UNDP, 2010, p.vi).

UNDP's earlier focus on evaluating, measuring and defining how well people were prospering on average seemed to be under critique. This 2010 *Report* reflected the new focus: there was one chapter on the advances of people followed by three chapters that examined how "Economic growth and human development do not always coincide," "Good things don't always come together" (UNDP, 2010, p.xi-xii). The old agenda was not completely overhauled, but examples of developmental failures were prioritized to a greater extent in this third moment.

The shifting focus towards poverty is also palpable in the oral histories conducted within the UN Intellectual History Project (see footnote 6). The interviewees, such as Mihaly Simai (a member of the UN Committee for Development Planning and involved in the New International Economic Order and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), and Hans Singer (an economist at various UN agencies between 1947 and 1969, including the United Nations Children Fund, World Food Program, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and the African Development Bank), partly narrated this shift as a reaction to the dominance of the 1980s structural adjustment plans, which they saw as increasing poverty (Simai, 2000, p.86; Singer, 2000). As confirmed by several interviewees, poverty had become the "number one priority" by the early 2000s (see Mills, 2000, p.40, see also 151; Pronk, 2000, pp.43–44; Simai, 2000, pp.75–76, 85; Singer, 2000, p.6; Klein, 2002, p.33) (Donald Mills was Jamaica's permanent representative to the UN, 1973-1981; Jan Pronk served as Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 1980-1986; and Lawrence Klein served as a consultant at several UN agencies.) These oral accounts articulated a redefinition of development from something that used to be about growth and economy and the nation state, to a process of nurturing people and their capabilities, and thence to something that focused on people that are denied development. Wealth was first humanized in 'people are the real wealth of the nation,' and then, as one interviewee, Adebayo Adedeji (executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa from 1975 to 1991) said, rapid economic growth coupled with increasing poverty pushed the UNDP to see some forms of growth as negative because "poverty dehumanizes" (Adedeji, 2001, p.86). Singer, was the most explicit:

> The creation of the Human Development Report—that certainly is an example of dynamic leadership which has, by now, made the reduction of poverty the main objective of development. It has made it universal, at least rhetorically (Singer, 2000, p.6).

The reasons given in the oral histories for such a shift from growth to poverty reduction "seems to reflect a realization that development prescriptions have not had the promised effects as far as that condition is concerned" (Mills, 2000, p.151) and that "if the world is not going to deal with poverty problems, then all the other things would be wasted because the growth of poverty would sweep away the achievements in other areas" (Simai, 2000, p.75).

These oral histories also noted the reverse causality – that not only was lack of development associated with poverty, but that poverty in turn hindered development and this might lead to political problems. This was perhaps too awkward for publication in the *Human Development Reports*, but one interviewee argued that rising poverty and inequalities were considered a threat to political stability. "The have-nots of the world," argued Mills, were not going "to wait patiently" (Mills, 2000, p.153).

"Let's recognize also that there is the matter of radical right wing ideology and action, fascism … associated with critical social and economic conditions in Europe and in Latin America, for example" (Mills, 2000, p.152). In short, increasing global poverty and subsequent international migration pushed the UNDP officials to treat global deprivation as their number one priority.

As the definition of development expanded beyond the narrow aggregate perspectives, the UNDP program also began to compare positive and negative experiences of development first in the 1990 *Report* and then to a greater focus on the negative by 2010 – evident in the use of, and then a lack of, a "balance sheet of human development" (UNDP, 1990, p.27). The 1990 *Report* dedicated a whole page to a list of "human progress" on the left or asset side, and instances of "human deprivation" on the right or liabilities side of the balance sheet of human development (UNDP, 1990, p.27). Items were categorized into life expectancy, education, income, health, children's health, food and nutrition, sanitation and women. For instance, in the human progress (asset) column, under the category of "income," it claimed that the "average per capita income in development countries increased by nearly 3% a year between 1965 and 1980," while under the human deprivation (liabilities) side of the balance sheet, it noted "more than a billion people still live in absolute poverty" (UNDP, 1990, p.27). The asset side listed advances and averages, whereas the liabilities side listed the have-nots and inequality measures. For example, under the heading "Food and nutrition," the "human progress" side stated that "the per capita average calorie supply increased by 20% between 1965 and 1985," while the "human deprivation" side noted that "150 million children under (one in every three) suffer from malnutrition" (UNDP, 1990, p.27). The UNDP thus set the average advances against persisting (or sometimes rising) inequalities.

The 1997 *Human Development Report* listed numbers that summarized "the balance sheet of poverty," including only head counts of human poverty (UNDP, 1997, p.3). The *Report* actively sought to steer away from discussing "winners" from development, and concentrated entirely on the "losers" (UNDP, 1997, p.82). The 2010 *Report* was even more one-sided and did not have a single instance of a balance sheet, for by then, attention was more solely focused on those in poverty. There was a chapter on the "advances of people" (UNDP, 2010, pp.25–44), but each section also included a discussion on instances of poverty, lack of education, poor living standards, etc.

The broad balance sheet notion of human development in the 1990 *Human Development Report* may have been an attempt to reconfigure the agenda away from the dominance of the IMF's and World Bank's priority on government balance sheets. Loans to developing countries, especially in the 1980s, had focused on countries' ability to pay back those loans by looking at their national balance sheets and making sure that governments did not have more liabilities than assets. But once the international agenda had clearly shifted away from those 1980s concerns, the use of one-sided poverty balance sheets in the 1997 and 2010 *Reports* reflected the shift of the development project to focus primarily on those parts of the population and areas that were denied development and those that were poor.

In sum, the UNDP's 1990 development approach originally *broadened* the definition of development by including other elements than economic growth and average income. But the 1997 and 2010 *Human Development Reports* illustrated a *change* in the definition of what development is and how it should be evaluated. We shall now turn to the innovations in measurements at the UNDP that corresponded to these redefinitions and refocusing of the agenda onto poverty and distributional issues.

3. Measuring Development in Terms of Poverty: From Averages to Inequalities

As the definition of development became more focused on the have-nots, the corresponding UNDP measures evolved from the Human Development Index, through the Human Poverty Index and finally to the Multidimensional Poverty Index. Overall our three moments of change saw the UNDP move from measuring averages of the national level to measuring differences at the national and sub-national level including specific subgroups of the population. In the first moment at 1990, it was Sen who helped secure acceptance for the idea that the singular, one-dimensional measure of progress defined by national income per capita was inadequate and should be replaced by the new multidimensional Human Development Index (Stewart, 2017, p.16; Sen, 1979, 1999). Moment two in 1997 saw the development of the Human Development Index into the Human Poverty Index. Moment 3 in 2010 introduced three "new tools" to the "*Human Development Report* family of indices," including the Multidimensional Poverty Index (UNDP, 2010, p.1). The latter index explicitly developed multiple indicators of experiences of poverty in order to define and measure many dimensions of inequality and so capture the unevenness of poverty.

The initial turn to the Human Development Index in 1990 was prompted by what was seen as over-reliance on average per capita Gross Domestic Product, a monetary assessment of development in average terms – an already well-known story and narrated in Morgan and Bach (2018). The Human Development Index included "three essential elements of human life – longevity, knowledge and decent living standards" (UNDP, 1990, p.12). Although the

> ideal would be to include many variables, to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible […] Too many indicators could produce a perplexing picture – perhaps distracting policy makers from the main overall trends. The crucial issue therefore is of emphasis (UNDP, 1990, p.11).

Too many indicators "would blur its focus and make it difficult to interpret and use" (UNDP, 1990, p.13). The first key indicator – life expectancy at birth – was chosen because "various indirect benefits (such as adequate nutrition and good health) are closely associated with higher life expectancy" (UNDP, 1990, p.12). Literacy rates, the second indicator, was illustrative of human development because "literacy is a person's first step in learning and knowledge-building" (UNDP, 1990, p.12). The third element – "command over resources needed for a decent living" – was the "most difficult to measure simply" (UNDP, 1990, p.12). Primarily for reasons of data availability, the UNDP used the logarithm of real Gross Domestic Product per capita for the income indicator from 1990 to 2010 (and the Gross National Product per capita as of 2010). Each of these elements was weighted equally in making up the index number.

The Human Poverty Index, introduced in the 1997 *Human Development Report*, was supposed to better reflect the deprivation in developing countries. But critically, "Rather than measure poverty by income, it uses indicators of the most basic experiences of deprivation: a short life, lack of basic education and lack of access to public and private resources" (UNDP, 1997, p.5). Again, there were three dimensions, all equally weighted. The first two measured characteristics of the index were more relevant to capture the experience of people in poverty, rather than the average person as the Human Development Index did: the health and education components measured probability at birth of not surviving to age 40 and adult literacy rate. The biggest difference, however, was in the standard of living component which used two physical indicators rather than a single monetary 'poverty line' for all countries. As explained in the report: money amongst the poor was not a good measure of standards of living, and even using different national monetary poverty lines did not allow for a useful comparison across countries:

> the use of the same poverty line in different countries can be very misleading because of the variation in "necessary" commodities. […] As a result, the minimum income needed to escape social estrangement can be quite different between communities (UNDP, 1997, p.18).

Instead the aim was to get closer to a measurement of poverty in real terms by including the two physical sub-components: the percentage of the population without sustainable access to an improved water source and the proportion of children underweight for age.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index was added at the third moment in the 2010 *Human Development Report*; it was developed jointly with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (UNDP, 2010, p.95; Alkire and Santos, 2010). As noted in the *Report's* foreword, "the new [Human Development Index] had its shortcomings, including a reliance on national averages, which concealed skewed distribution" (UNDP, 2010, p.iv). The Multidimensional Poverty Index measured both the headcount (and so also the share) of the multidimensionally poor people in society, and the average number of deprivations each multidimensionally poor household experienced. So the index maintained the three key categories found in the Human Development Index and Human Poverty Index: education, health and standard of living. However, the new index included ten indicators (that were linked to the Millennium Development Goals) instead of the three seen in the Human Development Index or the four in the Human Poverty Index. According to the new index, a poor household was one deprived in at least two to six indicators (the cut-off depended on the weight of each indicator), which was taken to reflect "acute deprivations" (UNDP, 2010, p.95) – see Table 1 below for the full list of indicators/measurements included in the index and their weightings.

Table 1 – Multidimensional Poverty Index

Component	Indicators/Measurements	W*
Health	Child mortality (if any child has died in the family)	1/6
	Nutrition (if any adult or child in the family is malnutritioned)	1/6
Education	Years of schooling (if no household member has completed 5 years of schooling)	1/6
	Child school attendance (if any school-aged child is out of school in years 1 to 8)	1/6
Standard of Living	Electricity (if household does not have electricity)	1/18
	Drinking water (if household does not meet Millennial Development Goals standards, or is more than 30 mins walk)	1/18
	Sanitation (if household does not meet Millennial Development Goals standards, or is more than 30 mins walk)	1/18
	Flooring (if the floor is dirt, sand, or dung)	1/18
	Cooking fuel (if the household cooks with wood, charcoal or dung)	1/18
	Assets (if household does not own more than one of: radio, tv, telephone, bike, motorbike or refrigerator and do not own a car or truck)	1/18

Notes: *W=weighting

The Multidimensional Poverty Index showed not just the number or proportion of people that were poor in a country, district, or by a specific identity group, but also the intensity experienced in such poverty (UNDP, 2010, p.95). The report explained that

> the Human Poverty Index used country averages to reflect aggregate deprivations in health, education and standard of living. It could not identify specific individuals, households or larger groups of people as jointly deprived. The Multidimensional Poverty Index addresses this shortcoming by capturing how many people experience overlapping deprivations and how many deprivations they face on average. It can be broken down by dimension to show how the composition of multidimensional poverty changes in incidence and intensity for different regions, ethnic groups and so on—with useful implications for policy (UNDP, 2010, p.95).

The inventors of this Index argued that including more dimensions of poverty could help policy makers to know what to focus on depending on the region. For instance, India was shown to have higher levels of poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index than according to the number of people below the World Bank's $1-a-day poverty line, suggesting that policy should focus on non-income factors or basic needs. Using the measurements meant policymakers could target particular goals and concentrate on those areas for which particular indicators revealed the worst outcomes (e.g. if households lacked a clean water supply, then constructing better access to clean water could be prioritized).

The large amount of data needed to compile the component indicators for the Multidimensional Poverty Index meant that the index as a whole could only be compiled for just over 100 countries (whereas the Human Development Index existed for most countries). It has nevertheless managed to dethrone singular (unidimensional) measurements of income poverty – such as the World

Bank's $1-a-day measure – just as earlier, the Human Development Index had managed to compete with and to some extent replace the average monetary measure of development found in the per capita Gross National Product (Alkire and Foster, 2009). The UNDP's poverty indices created a physical poverty line, as supposed to the World Bank's monetary poverty line, and this – more than anything – changed the target population, who was measured, and the prescribed and implemented policies.

Research on the various definitions of poverty have discussed on how poverty lines distinguish and draw lines between the poor and non-poor, but none finds a clear break between the characteristics of the two groups (Laderchi et al., 2003, p.13; Stewart et al., 2007). This is therefore a tricky area, for it depends on the cut-off points in the poverty indices whether a person or household is either in the category of people who are poor or they are not. So, in the UNDP's poverty indices, the population is treated as binary compared to the Human Development Index and other aggregate figures, where the population is reported in terms of an average person.

As the human development approach shifted in concept, the oral histories make it clear that the officials were constantly striving for particular definitions and matching measurement tools to be seen, heard, used, and widely disseminated, all in the name of bringing human development to the deprived. But taking action was a different matter, and from our contextual reading, one of the major problems was the need to find an action that everyone could agree on. In Kofi Annan's interview, he narrated how he proposed the Millennium Summit when he took office as the 7th Secretary-General of the UN in 1997 to review "what we should be focusing on, so that we can reorient our efforts and direct our resources" (Annan, 2002, p. 24). Another interviewee, Adedeji, spoke of how the South needed, despite the difficulty, to decide on minimum standards and in turn persuade the North to agree, because "unless you get the support of the North, your resolutions will not pass" (Adedeji, 2001, p. 106). A third interviewee, Margaret J. Anstee, an employee at the UN between 1952 and 1993 most notably serving as the Under-Secretary General in 1987, described – in a different context – how her work on peacebuilding led to an agreement. She remembered the event fondly: "It is so nice at the UN when you find everyone in agreement," "We don't want the kind of report that says, 'X said this, but on the other hand, Y said this.' We want something that states clearly, 'We have agreed on a course of action'" (Anstee, 2000, p.157). Clearly, a sufficient amount of agreement had to be found to establish new norms and subsequent policy actions. Poverty action required one definition, goal and target that could create a consensus, an 'umbrella' that could cover the work at the UNDP, IMF and World Bank.

The UNDP admitted that it was a difficult task to find such a consensus. In Mills' interview, he said it was impossible to get an unanimity: "can you get agreement on a global strategy that is going to satisfy, say the developing countries. It is not possible" (Mills, 2000, p.30). In the 2010 *Human Development Report,* the search for an agreement shift was narrated as being founded on Sen's thesis in the *Idea of Justice* that "we need not agree on the lineaments of a perfectly just society" (UNDP, 2010, p.16), provided "we can agree that some states of affairs are better than others. We can identify clear injustices that people and societies must remove" (UNDP, 2010, p.16). Sen thus disagreed with the dominant aim, exemplified by John Rawls, that we can "secure agreement on what constitutes a just society and its associated rules and institutions" (UNDP, 2010, p.16). As quoted in section 2 above, the move towards a focus on the have-nots came from UNDP's realization that despite the world's "many gains," "the human development approach is motivationally committed to concentrating on what remains undone … from poverty and deprivation to inequality" (UNDP, 2010, p.vi). The UNDP should not only concentrate on evaluating, measuring and defining people who were prospering, nor even on the average person, but should rather concentrate on the have-nots. Refocusing human development onto the poor then became a question of political, cultural and institutional practicalities, and the extent to which they enabled possibilities for action.

4. Development Numbers for 'Greater Accountability'?

What gets measured gets counted. We mean this not in the obvious sense that measuring and counting are taken to be more or less the same activity – but in the sense that what gets measured is what gets taken into account, and provides the means for holding people or organizations to account for the performance of those numbers. Accounting first of all requires the definition of categories of account. So the historical changes we have traced: first that poverty numbers matter more than income per head, and then that the experiences of poverty matter more than the simple number of people in poverty, are associated not just with a change of focus by the international agencies but with a radical change in categories. Overall, this amounts to a change in accounting standards, with considerable implications for audit possibilities at the UNDP and national governments.

It is perhaps easier to see how important this change is by considering the accounting standards that were implicit with earlier means of measuring well-being and development by Gross National Product (or Gross Domestic Product) per capita. Since WWII, these numbers had long been gathered by domestic and international agencies; and during early post-war decades these were the typical public numbers on which national-level action was supposed to be taken. But as successive decades of development planning and action showed, it proved very difficult to create growth per capita through reliable recipes of economic intervention. There were two elements here – population growth and economic growth – which meant that governments needed to control two equally unruly elements. Planning growth as an overall macro ambition was a broad and unfocussed ambition, and it is no surprise that it was and remains an uncertain project, with very little accountability through international agencies in holding governments to account.

It is in this context that changing the ambitions from increasing growth per capita to improving a fixed number of measurable experiences of poverty can be seen as providing a radical change in accounting standards. This is not just about what is counted, and so what can be audited, but more important about the possibilities for making these improvements. First, increasing the number of things which get measured increased the possibilities for action – each of the separate measured 'poverty experiences' could be the site for action by individual countries. Second, they were largely separate independent sites of intervention – so could be attacked piecemeal compared to the complicated behavioural interrelations of the macro-economy, and the associated complex ways in which governments tried to influence GNP growth. Third, the individual elements in the new accounting regime were ones that could respond to meaningful and focussed action on behalf of government or by third party initiatives. It is easier to gather allies, easier to gather investments, and easier to achieve improvements in – e.g. elements such as infant mortality, school enrolments, domestic electric supply, clean water (as in India and parts of Africa over recent decades) – than to influence the rate of overall growth. For these reasons it is also easier to create an audit regime for these individual elements.

UNDP officials understood much of this agenda, even if they were not fully aware of the potential of these changes. They assumed that changes in the measurement of poverty experiences led to a better understanding of reality but they also saw that it created the information set (the audit regime) for much needed accountability and so might prompt action. We see this first in a text box in the 1997 *Human Development Report* entitled "Monitoring progress in eradicating poverty," where monitoring is said to lead (amongst other things) to "establishing public accountability for progress in poverty reduction" (UNDP, 1997, p.115). "A strategy for poverty eradication must focus not only on what need, to be done, but on how to ensure that action is taken" (UNDP, 1997, pp.110–111). At this stage, the UNDP wanted to ensure that action was taken by measuring and publicizing their numbers on the trends of poverty. Measurement was thought to help set targets, as Annan explained in his 2002 interview,

> I think by having goals and challenging the governments to implement, and telling them we will monitor and produce annual reports, so we can see where we are succeeding and where we are failing, we are really challenging everybody to step up and really deliver (Annan, 2002, pp.31–32).

Moreover, he expressed a need for such numbers as a "benchmark," because if you did not, you "set yourself up, as you say, for failure" (Annan, 2002, p.32). The *Human Development Report* of 2010 told a similar narrative, in which development numbers were explicitly linked to accountability. One section was entitled "Moves towards greater accountability" (UNDP, 2010, p.21). The section continued,

> Over time, the focus on monitoring has grown, linked to a movement supporting greater state and donor accountability. Results-based management, including using performance information in making budget allocations, has featured in several public sector reforms (UNDP, 2010, p.21).

An important element for countries in using measurements in an audit regime came from the fact that those numbers provided *comparative* information about each individual country's poverty conditions and reduction performance, and so the effect of measurement helped to build accountability not just within UNDP programs and to prompt their actions, but also for individual countries. As Sen and Richard Jolly (the co-director of the UN Intellectual History Project, and previously the deputy executive director of UNICEF and special advisor to the administrator of

UNDP and architect of the *Human Development Report*) said in their interviews: indices were designed so that countries' performance could be easily and effectively compared (Jolly, 2005, p.134; Sen, 2003, p.24). The UNDP believed in the need for ranking countries and measurement as a means to see whether countries were meeting agreed-upon targets, but also to set these countries into competition with each other (Morgan and Bach, 2018). The UNDP explicitly ran such an auditing regime – measuring performance and then holding to account – since they believed that country differences would spur domestic action.

However, just as with an audit regime based on Gross National Product per capita, it proved equally difficult to hold a country to account using the new poverty measurements produced at the UNDP. One interviewee, John Gerard Ruggie, assistant secretary-general and senior advisor for strategic planning to Secretary-General Annan, 1997-2001, was explicit about the lack of UNDP's ability to enforce targets on countries: "Obviously they have their own independent governing bodies, and there is not much we can do to force them to change their behaviour" (Ruggie, 2001, p.54). "But," he continued, "we can certainly define initiatives and projects in such a way to get them very interested" (Ruggie, 2001, p.54). Similarly, Annan, in his interview, made it clear to the national governments at the UNDP, "You are the ones who have to go back home and implement it. It can only work if we take action at the country level. […] It's your responsibility to implement" (Annan, 2002, p.31). The UNDP could create a change to a human-oriented poverty reducing program, one that was in principle much easier to use for action than earlier regimes, but it could not effectively enforce or create change in countries' practices – unless they chose to act.

If the UNDP had more political power, all these public measurements might have been less necessary as accountability tools. As one interviewee, Leticia Shahani, assistant secretary-general for social development and humanitarian affairs, 1981-1986, affirmed,

> if you are in power, legitimate power, you can eliminate poverty overnight if you want to. […] You don't need all that intellectual and technical equipment. Even if you have the tools to measure, the political will is so important and the sincerity, the credibility of government (Shahani, 1999, p.30).

In a time, said Shahani, when political leadership on reducing poverty was lacking "the UN fills this vacuum but inadequately" (Shahani, 1999, p.30). Shahani believed that the "UN has the moral authority," but it had to be careful to not go too far: "That is the culture of the UN system. Member governments are jealous of the UN having too much power, even in issues of development and elimination of poverty" (Shahani, 1999, p.30), and ultimately the UNDP had no political power to implement change. Instead, it had to rely on these new kinds of numbers set in their new accounting standards, each of which could be acted upon separately, and to publicize them as tools of persuasion.

One might ask: What legitimacy does an institution have, if it does not hold itself or its members accountable? Newell and Bellour argued in their survey of accountability in development discourse and projects that "inconsequential accountability is not accountability at all" (Newell and Bellour, 2002, p.8). Accountability "implies both a measure of *answerability* (providing an account for actions undertaken) and *enforceability* (punishment or sanctions for poor or illegal performance) (Newell and Bellour, 2002, pp.1–2) (italics in original). Despite accountability implying unequal power relations – who has the power to call for an account and who is forced to explain their actions – no one is completely powerless. There are ways power can be exerted bottom-up – even if to a lesser extent (Newell and Bellour, 2002, pp.2–3). It is clear that the UNDP understood this conundrum, and this explains the importance they attached to the open publication and publicity of comparable numbers (audit) and their willingness to sponsor 'bottom-up' prompts to actions (accountability).

This understanding by the UNDP is consistent with analyses provided by sociologists of accounting. Power (1999) demonstrates convincingly that audit processes are most powerful when they employ the less powerful – in our case the poor – in the regime of audit: "The ideal form of surveillance is the totally observed and known individual who ends up as a self-observing and self-disciplining agent" (Power, 1999, p.128). We see this in the 1997 *Human Development Report,* where the UNDP seemed to want the poor, or people closest to poverty, to define poverty for it included definitions of poverty by poor people, or people living amongst poverty – those experienced in poverty. In the first chapter of the 1997 *Human Development Report*, poverty definitions from the margins of society are placed in clear sight in the margins of the page. Some speak of social consequences of poverty: an educator from Colombia wrote that "poverty … does not allow people to be people" and a single mother from Guyana stated that "poverty is … loneliness, … discrimination and abuse" (UNDP, 1997, p.16). The majority discussed economic deprivation: a panhandler from the United States said "Poverty means never having quite enough to eat" and a refugee from Azerbaijan felt that "Poverty is the impossibility of living in your own home" (UNDP, 1997, p.16-20). The World Bank's 2000 *World Development Report* was partly based on interviews with 60,000 poor people in 60 different countries (World Bank, 2000, p.2-3). Similarly, the IMF's and World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of 2000 were supposedly written hand-in-hand with the country loan-recipients – although research has shown that every Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is essentially identical and follows the agencies' strategies (Stewart and Wang, 2005)![6]

Newell and Bellour argued that these new relationships between international organizations, private sector actors, civil society and non-governmental organizations – what O'Brian et al. (2000) labelled complex multilateralism – produced new "opportunities for the construction of new accountabilities" (Newell and Bellour, 2002, p.4). Developing Power's argument that the most powerful form of audit induces self-accountability, O'Brian et al. identified four reasons why the relatively powerful and influential international organizations listen to the relatively insignificant and powerless social movements pushed by civil society and non-governmental organizations. First, the international organizations may have known better than national governments what the problems were and, second, it was easier to implement policy through non-governmental organizations on the ground. Third, if international organizations had the support of civil society and private actors, public support could be secured, and a project was more likely to be implemented. Finally, in some cases they argue that there were increasing direct demands from governments to cater to these smaller stakeholders and in other cases the international organizations were pre-empting complaints from governments (O'Brian et al., 2000, pp.19-20).

Our analysis of the Human Development Index, Human Poverty Index and Multidimensional Poverty Index since the 1990s shows how socio-economic characteristics were measured and brought into developmental policy debates and implementation, with an evident consequence that over the last 25 years, the regime of plausible and possible accountability via measurements has changed very radically. But it remains unclear if the UNDP really aimed to devolve the regime of auditing to the poor, or to poor countries; and equally unclear whether this was to empower them, or rather to integrate them into the regime of self-audit as the audit expansion went on? The assumption that

[6] We thank Frances Stewart for bringing this paper to our attention.

because self-accountability in this kind of international audit system is possible, it will automatically develop, as Merry (2011) seems to imply, may be overstated. Either way, we conclude that there was no real devolution either of definitions of measurement, or of audit, or of self-accountability in the UNDP case for the *Human Development Reports* were primarily written by elites in the offices of the international agencies. As Stewart (2007; 2017) observes in her analysis, the dominant developed world dictated not just policy but even measurement and accounting regimes to developing countries (naturally varying in degrees across regions). So, despite the changes in concepts, in categories, and in measurement from income per head to many different experienced measures of poverty, it remained an international audit and accounting regime. This is one such consequence of unequal international relations – developing countries remain measured and judged on a set of indicators that rank them against the rest of the world. In turn, the agenda for change was set not in developing countries, but more often directly implemented from abroad through institutions like the IMF and World Bank, and indirectly through the UN.

5. Conclusion

The progression from Human Development Index, Human Poverty Index and then to Multidimensional Poverty Index was a shift from focusing on development to poverty reduction. The shift refocused the target of the UNDP research activity, changed what was measured, and in turn who was measured, from the average of everyone's economic activity to the characteristic problems of the poor. The UNDP officials and *Human Development Reports* boasted of the need for more measurement tools and targets to create greater accountability and policy actions. But while the measurement tools multiplied, and the possibilities for audit within and between countries massively increased, accountability to the UNDP remained shaky. As Power argued, more accounting does not necessarily lead to better accountability (Power, 1999, p.127).

UNDP's shift towards focusing on poverty was over-taken: The Millennium Development and Sustainable Development Goals in 2000 and 2015 broadened the attention in development projects and discourse with several more goals and even more measures. The goals have widened the concept of development beyond poverty and development – including, for instance, environmental degradation. 2010, perhaps, then marked the end of a 20-year project which first modified development discourse towards human development and then to poverty. We are now in a period of development being defined more broadly as how to live a good life.

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